The Fourth Church Pulpit

BEARING GIFTS WE TRAVERSE AFAR

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John M. Buchanan

"Everlasting God,
the radiance of faithful souls,
who brought the nations to your light
and kings to the brightness of your rising:
Fill the world with your glory,
and show yourself to all the nations;
through him who is the true light
and the bright morning star,
Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

Book of Common Worship
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Isaiah 63:7-9
Matthew 2:1-12

"... opening their reasure chests, they offered him gifts ..."
Matthew 2:11 (NRSV)

One of the most beloved Christmas stories of all is *Gifts of the Magi* by O. Henry, which was the pen name of William Sydney Porter, a turn-of-the century American author.

The story is about Mr. and Mrs. James Dillingham Young, Jim and Della, in their early twenties, trying to make a go of it in an inexpensive and shabby flat in New York. Mr. Dillingham's wages have just been cut. It's Christmas. Della has managed to save $1.87 to buy a present for her husband. Jim has no money to buy a present for her ...

> "Now there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair.
>
> "Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry and mocked at Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy."

On the very day Della acknowledged the fact that her paltry savings were not going to provide much of a gift for her husband, she stood looking at herself in the mirror, her beautiful hair cascading down, and she made an inspired and fateful decision. She ran to a hair goods shop and impulsively sold her hair for $20.00.

> "Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present. ...
>
> "She found it at last. It surely had been made for him and no one else. There was none other like it in any of the stores, it was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value ... As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's."

The watch chain cost $21.00 and she hurried home with her treasure.

She tried to repair the damage her generosity had caused by curling the little hair left on her head and prepared dinner, eagerly awaiting Jim's return, worried now about his reaction to her new look.

When Jim arrived he stopped, stared at her — stunned. "Your hair" he said. "It's gone."

> "'Yes,' Della said. 'It's sold and gone.'
>
> "Out of his trance Jim seemed to quickly wake ... Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table. ..."

Della tore at the string and paper — her cry of joy changed to tears. ...

> "For there lay The Combs — the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims — just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

"But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: 'My hair grows so fast, Jim!'

"Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull, precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit. ...

"'Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it.'

"Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"'Dell,' said he, 'let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs ...'"
[Jack Newcomb, editor, *A Christmas Treasury*, p. 209-213]

There is required, I have observed, both art and science in the giving of gifts and in the receiving of gifts. The brilliance of O. Henry's story is that Jim and Della have both. They know how to give and they know how to receive.

Children, I think sometimes, are born with the instinct. A few days before Christmas I was talking to Carolyn on the telephone. Carolyn will be three in January. She lives in Texas and she is my granddaughter. "What do you want for Christmas, Carolyn?" I asked. "It's a secret" she said. And then, whispering "But we sent you a book and some underwear ..." "Don't tell," she added. She had all the pieces of the ritual, I concluded. She simply had them in the wrong sequence. Carolyn had more art than science, but her instincts are excellent.

It is very big business — gift giving is. We spend an enormous amount of time, energy and creativity, not to nention money, on Christmas gifts.

Retailers make it or don't make it for the year based on sales in the last four weeks. And all of it is an expanded variation on a theme first sounded two thousand years ago when Magi — the Three Wise Men of tradition — arrived to pay homage to a new born infant and gave him precious gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

They are intriguing characters in the nativity. They were astrologers and their story has been amplified by art, music, legend and religious myth over the centuries.

Magi were the first century equivalent of consultants. Kings called on them regularly before mounting military campaigns. Businessmen asked their advice before investing. Families of means hired them to consult on matters of marriage and romance.

So when astrologers in the East observe a new phenomenon in the heavens they set out to discover the event it signalled, in all probability the birth of a new king. The Adler Planetarium will tell you about the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn at the time — if you need a little science. And they did the logical thing: they called on Herod — King of the Jews — in his enormous palace in Jerusalem asking if a new king had been born. Herod was a great king, one of history's most productive builders. He constructed whole cities, the mammoth harbor at Caesarea, a series of huge and palatial fortresses from one end of the land to the other. He was also incredibly cruel. In order to consolidate his political position, Herod had murdered members of his own family. When the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, heard about it he said "I'd rather be Herod's pig than his son."

When Herod hears the question about a new king, he convenes the religious authorities and says in effect: "Let's suppose that the Messiah, the one who will come to the throne of David (the one I'm sitting on, by the way) came — now. Where would he likely be born?" And the religious authorities, with embarrassing naivete, tell him, quoting a little Scripture: "And you, O Bethlehem, from you shall come a ruler."

And so it was Herod who pointed the Magi toward Bethlehem and off they go looking, I suppose, for the newest baby and when they find him, when they see the child, they do the most astonishing thing — they give him wonderful gifts.

There is art in the receiving of gifts. I used to wonder what Mary and Joseph did with the gold, frankincense and myrrh, not exactly baby gifts, and decided that they used it to buy a few camels for the long trip down to Egypt. Of one thing I'm certain and that is that Mary did not say what you and I sometimes say when we are given a wonderfully generous gift — "Oh you shouldn't have done that."

What a peculiar and significant thing to say.

John Steinbeck observed that:

> "It is so easy to give, so exquisitely rewarding. Receiving, on the other hand, if it is well done requires a fine balance of self-knowledge and kindness. It requires humility and tact ..." [*New York Times Magazine*, 12/24/95]

It is more blessed to give than to receive, Jesus said, and most of us have discovered that. But we also know that it is, in some ways, easier, and that we are better at giving than receiving.

We know people to whom it is impossible to give anything, even a compliment. "You look nice today" — "No I don't, I look awful." "That's a pretty coat" — "No it's an old one."

The great theologian Karl Barth thought it was a spiritual problem. Barth used to preach almost every Sunday morning in the city jail in Basel. And in one memorable Christmas sermon he said:

> "We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." [*Deliverance to the Captives*, p.40]

I've never heard Carolyn say "Oh, you shouldn't have, Granddaddy." But I've said it and wished I hadn't. Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist who did pioneering work in religion and psychology, observed that even though the Christian church has been proclaiming the free grace of God for twenty centuries, a stronger message is:

> "the psychological attitude, the idea deeply ingrained in the heart — that everything must be paid for." [*Guilt and Grace*, p. 174]

Tournier thinks that when we say "You shouldn't have," we may be saying, "I don't want to be obligated to you." "I don't want to have to respond to your generosity." We may be saying "I don't want to get this close." And we may be saying "I really don't feel like I deserve this. I'm not good enough for this gift."

All of which is confounded and overcome and overwhelmed by Christmas, by what the Magi saw when they arrived — a child — God's love and grace given absolutely, utterly, with no conditions, no strings attached, no deserving to be earned, no correctness to be achieved: just a gift, an absolutely gracious gift of love ... to which the only plausible possible response is to receive it, to hold it tightly and to say "thank you" — and to open your heart and your hands and give whatever you have.

Sometimes life teaches us the truth of that. There is a new book of letters from prison by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor and theologian, who was jailed and executed by the Nazis. Bonhoeffer's older book, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, is a Christian classic. These letters are a recent discovery. Bonhoeffer had a fiance, Maria von Wedemeyer, with whom he corresponded regularly during his time in prison. When Maria died a few years ago, the letters became public. As Christmas 1943 approached, Bonhoeffer hoped he would be released and reunited with his family and with Maria. But then the hearing was cancelled and it became clear that there would be no reunion. He wrote to Maria:

> "I think we're going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious. The emptier our hands the better we understand ..." [*Love Letters from Cell 92*, p. 128]

What is given, when the gift is genuine, is the giver — himself or herself. The monetary value of the gift is not ultimately the point. A true gift is always, in some way, extravagant and unnecessary, and carries within it something of the heart, the love, the life of the giver.

So, in these lovely quieter days of Christmastide, ponder the gifts you gave others and the gifts you received. Ponder how much of yourself you gave and how much of those precious others: your beloveds, were given humbly and genuinely and extravagantly to you. Ponder and be grateful.

And do ponder the gift — God's son, God's love come down. God's self — in a manger, given for your salvation. Ponder and be grateful — and give your heart.

O. Henry concluded:

> "The Magi, as you know, were wise men — wonderfully wise men — who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were of the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the Magi."

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Dear God, we are grateful, grateful as children who have been given many gifts, for your love, given in Jesus Christ. We are grateful for the gifts we've received from others — for the love and affection and caring borne by these gifts.

So now, as the celebrations end, and the decorations are put away, help us hold in our hearts the gift of yourself — in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.